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Source: *Oriente Moderno*, 2003, Nuova serie, Anno 22 (83), Nr. 2, Studies on Arabic Epics (2003), pp. 399-406

Published by: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino

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SĪRAT ʿANTAR AS AN ORAL EPIC

Ethnopoetic theories for epic have lately received renewed scholarly attention. Here, the epic about the hero and poet ʿAntar shall be discussed with the help of these theories (see below, *Appendix*, for a very concise summary of the relevant theories). The *Sīra*'s genre, the main outlines of its composition and the relation of some episodes to epic content types will be discussed.

The literary tradition

Sīrat ʿAntar shows properties of several epic traditions (see below, *Appendix*, point 1.2). It contains a full biography of ʿAntar, from the conception story to his death and burial (BIOGRAPHIC tradition). Yet, ʿAntar is not the social center, the chief, surrounded by his paladins; rather he himself functions as a paladin, the chief being the dynasty Ġazīmah-ʿAmr-Zuhayr-Qays. ʿAntar starts his career under Zuhayr's chieftainship, and most of his activity passes under Qays' chieftainship. In this respect ʿAntar can be compared to the Persian *Šāhnāme*'s epic character Rustam, who also serves as paladin under several overlords and features a whole biography. Zuhayr and Qays show traits of the ruler in the CENTRIC tradition: they have no developed biography and they take part in combat not as leaders, if at all. In case of need Qays will come to rescue a tough situation; in this he reminds the activity of Mongol-Kalmyk central epic character Džangar and of Rustam's overlords. Yet, even when Qays comes to a combat, he does not do the decisive fighting by himself but brings with him a troop which does the fighting. Examples from other traditions include the relation between the five Pandava brothers in the ancient Indian epic of *Mahābhārata*: the oldest brother, Yudhishtira, who is the "raja," does little fighting; his younger brothers function as paladins who do the fighting, the principal paladin being Arjuna, who has his own line of adventures.

The biography

ʿAntar's biography starts with the story of his parents (see Hahn's 1876 scheme, points 1-3; Rank's 1909 scheme, points 1-2; Raglan's 1936 scheme, points 1-5; Nekljudov's 1974 scheme, points 1-2). The mother is a foreigner, a captive, i.e., a bondwoman, a slave and not even a legal secondary wife and thus his lineage is problematic. He has no maternal relatives in the framework of the society he grew up in and of which he was a member. To make things more problematic, his mother is a black African and thus he is born with a dark skin, as fit for a

slave in Arabic society. This slave-quality earns him the enmity of his father which functions in the biographical scheme instead of a bad omen or prophecy about the newborn hero (Hahn 1876, point 4; Rank 1909, point 3). 'Antar is treated like a slave and put to herd camels, i.e., he is outside the father's home where legal sons are reared and active (Hahn, points 5-7; Rank, point 6; Raglan, point 8; Nekljudov, points 7 and 8.2).

As a boy 'Antar shows heroic warrior-championship's qualities (kills single-handedly wolf, lion, slave) (Hahn, point 8; Nekljudov, point 8.3), what frightens his father and he plots to kill 'Antar (Hahn, point 5; Rank, point 4; Raglan, point 6), but abstains from the plan (Hahn, points 5-6; Rank, point 4-5; Raglan, point 7).

Before embarking on the champion career, the warrior has to obtain special physical strength, a special horse and special weapons (does not figure in the biographical schemes mentioned above). Special strength is a fabulous trait and is given by fabulous beings (e.g., a divinity or demoness suckles him weapons can be either realistic or fabulous. 'Antar acquires a realistic horse and realistic weapons, but no fabulous physical strength. 'Antar has also a retinue of helpers, namely his older half-brothers Šaybūb and Ġarīr.

'Antar's "first martial exploit" (Hahn, point 8; Raglan, point 11; Nekljudov, point 10.1) is to fight of an enemy attack. The question of 'Antar's acknowledgement as warrior and acceptance as a regular member of the tribe rises (Hahn, points 10(a), 11(a)(b); Rank, point 9; Raglan, point 13). It will remain a problem for a long time. The theme is repeated many times and forms a framework to many of 'Antar's combats, till finally he will be accepted and his cousin 'Ablah will be given to him in marriage (Raglan, point 12; Nekljudov, point 10.3; see below, Appendix, point 2, Division 12).

Some of 'Antar's actions to gain status follow ECType 1.1.3.2, The Offended Champion (see below, Appendix, point 2):

Leader/elder has insulted principal champion: Šaddād refuses to acknowledge his son 'Antar; champion refuses to fight: when enemy attacks, 'Antar refuses to fight until he is promised acknowledgement; champion enters combat and defeats enemy: 'Antar defeats enemy.

This episode is repeated several times. Examples from other ethnic traditions: Type 1.1.3.2 forms the framing story of the Iliad and also appears in the Mahābhārata: the leader of the Kaurava insults champion Karna, who will return to combat only after this leader is killed in combat.

Innumerable adventures precede and follow 'Antar's wedding. Those which precede the wedding can be considered functioning as suitors' tasks; at the same time they function as tests of 'Antar's suitability for full tribal membership as a free man (Hahn, points 10(2), 11(a)(b); Rank, point 9; Raglan, point 13). This acceptability will, however, not be complete until the lineage of 'Antar's mother is not found out. One of the adventures, which is not otherwise motivated is his raid to Abyssinia-Africa, the homeland of his mother. There he finds her relatives who turn out to be respectable (royalty). Only now 'Antar gains full ac-

ceptance in the eyes of the epic (in his society he gained it before, otherwise 'Ablah would not be given to him).

'Antar's adventures form an episode each which is closed in itself and belongs to the subgenre of EPISODIC EPIC. Here we find duels (see below, Appendix, point 2, Division 3), combats one-vs-many (Division 2) and battles (Division 1) or better, raids and forays (Division 4). Interwoven are innumerable captures (Division 7) and deliveries (Division 8) or raids to capture material goods and women (Sub-divisions 5.4, 5.5 and Sub-division 12.1).

Towards the close of life it turns out that 'Antar has no regular, legitimate sons from his principal wife 'Ablah (Raglan, point 19). He has only issues of irregular liaisons, mostly with enemy women whom he rapes. These sons he meets unrecognized and only after a duel father and son recognize each other (coded as epic content Type 5.1.4.1, see Appendix, point 2, below). Most of them are killed before 'Antar's death.

Also towards the end of his life 'Antar falls out with his chief and they part (Raglan, point 16). 'Antar is killed in an unheroic way, which, however, has parallels in other ethnic traditions: a (blind) man (warrior, hunter) fatally shoots the hero, aiming according to sound, or in darkness mistaking him for an animal (Hellenistic Jewish tradition: Kain is killed by his blind descendant Lamech who mistook him for an animal, *Genesis* 17-24 and Ginzberg 1909-1938, vol. I, p. 116; ancient Indian tradition: hunter kills Kriṣṇa mistaking him for an animal, *Mahābhārata*, Book XVI, ch. 4, see Jacobi 1903, p.189). 'Antar dies on a higher level spot (not exactly a hill top – Raglan, points 17-18), and is three times re-buried, yet there is no tradition about his tomb (Raglan, points 20-21).

In conclusion, the *Sirah* can be divided into four parts which are partly intertwined:

- (1) 'Antar struggles to be accepted as a full and regular member of his father's family and tribe.
- (2) 'Antar fulfills suitor's task in order to win his chosen bride.
- (3) Adventures which are irrelevant to the first two goals (above), and undertaken after the goals have been achieved; they demonstrate 'Antar's heroism and daring.
- (4) The whole story if framed with the episodes of birth-childhood and rejection-death.

Semantic Classification

On the level of semantics (see below, Appendix, point 1.1), the epic of 'Antar belongs to the subgenre of "martial historic epic," and is set in the realistic mode. Fabulous elements are rare, these appear in the raid to Africa. Otherwise all actors and objects (animals, dwellings, clothes, weapons) and events (battles, weddings, feasts) are in realistic dimensions, and have realistic qualities. The few fabulous elements, such as those met with in the African raid (see discussion in Norris 1980) and the few cases of help granted by Muḥammad upon calling his name (intervention of the sacred power) seem to be late literary additions. Let us note that all of this fabulous intrusions happen outside the biography proper, i.e. in the span of time between 'Antar's wedding and the end episodes of his life.

There is no contemporary historical documentation about the figures acting in the *Sirah*. As the society was illiterate and its members had little dealings with the outside world which was literate, such documentation cannot be expected (literacy here means written literature and private and public archives where documentation could be found); yet, as the proportions of people, objects and events are realistic (except for the sizes of the fighting contingents involved!), and the level of abstraction low, the work corresponds to the description of the subgenre of HISTORIC EPIC.

Battles, raids and duels in the *Sirah* follow the model of Epic Narrative Segments (ENS-units; see below, Appendix, point 3); the analysis of a segment of text (a single adventure) into ENS-units could not be done in the framework of this short paper and will have to wait for another occasion. (The *Sirah* has been analyzed with the help of Lyon's 1995 summaries.)

Appendix: Models and Categories

(after Jason, n.d.)

(1) The genre of oral epic (after Jason 1977a and n.d., vol. I). As the term "epic" (as a noun) is used to label various kinds of literary works, we start with the definition what we here label "martial epic": a narrative work, which may be couched in either verse or prose or, includes both forms ("prosimetrum") and is usually performed in sung or recitative form, i.e. in a formal way, at set occasions, by skilled performers, often professionals. The subject matter is a description of conflict between two social groups: families, clans, tribes, nations; positive and negative divinities (=demons), with or without human participation. It is a struggle fought over domination, power and command and for resources (such as land, women) and goods (such as livestock, battle horses and equipment, precious objects). It is fought out on the level of physical abilities, with or without help of deception, and with or without help of supernatural (fabulous) abilities and forces (human or divine/demonic). The epic world is strictly divided between "us" (with whom the performer and his audience identify) and "them". This genre is central to the society's culture and embodies its values; religious literature may push it to a somewhat lower status. This ethnopoetic genre has been identified for the Euro-Afro-Asian cultural area (encompassing Christian Europe, Muslim North Africa, Near and Middle East, Central Asia, and Muslim and Hindu India with the addition of Tibet and Mongolia) (after Jason 1988 and 1992).

Subgenres of the genre of oral epic

(1.1) Subgenres on the level of semantics (nature of opponents and of conflict):

MYTHIC EPIC, in which various groups of divinities create the human world in a struggle with each other.

UNIVERSAL EPIC, in which positive divinities and humans fight negative demonic-monster forces.

NATIONAL EPIC, in which an ethnic group (a nation) is represented by superhuman figures, who do the fighting single-handed; the action is on a high

level of abstraction and does not follow historical reality; most characters are poetic images.

HISTORIC EPIC, in which naturally-sized characters fight each other, on a low level of abstraction and in a rather close relation to historical reality; characters tend to be historical figures.

(1.2) Subgenres on the level of the literary patterning of the tradition:

EPISODIC TRADITION; Works are independent of each other and do not form a continuous narrative. There is no chronological order between them. Characters are independent of each other and relations between them exist only in the confines of a single work; there is no hierarchy between them. Thus, the illusion is created that all of them belong to a single generation, with fathers and sons of the main generation only marginally appearing.

BIOGRAPHIC TRADITION: There is a central character about whose whole biography the tradition tells, starting with birth stories, childhood and growing-up stories and ending with stories about his death. These form a framework, the middle of which fill stories of the episodic kind (see below, point (2), content types of the episodic tradition). The central character of the biographic tradition is usually the leader-ruler (king, chief) of the ethnic unit which bears the tradition, and the rest of warrior-champions are his paladins, i.e. a clear hierarchy exists; as the whole epic happening is thought of having occurred during the ruler's life time, all the characters belong to the same generation (for scheme of heroic biography see Hahn 1876, Rank 1909, Raglan 1936, Nekljudov 1974; the first three include also non-epic heroes, such as saints; Taylor 1964 and Dundes 1978 discuss and compare them).

CENTRIC TRADITION. In this tradition there exists a ruler, who forms the center, whom the paladins surround. The ruler is most of the time passive, and the paladins do the fighting. There is none, or only a weak biography of the ruler. All warrior-champions belong to the same generation and their adventures belong to the episodic tradition; usually, they have no biographies.

(2) Epic Content Types (ECT). A content type describes an epic theme. Work and type are not identical; most works consist of more than one content type. About 250 content types could be identified for the subgenre of "epic of episodic tradition" (see above); these are grouped into 14 "divisions", as follows (after Jason, n.d., vol. II):

Forms of combat

Division 1, Battle of armies (Sub-division 1.1: Combat with physical means; Sub-division 1.2: Use of deception in battle; Sub-division 1.3: Fabulous elements in battle).

Division 2, Combat one-vs-many.

Division 3, Duel.

Division 4, Raids and forays.

Conflicts

Division 5, Knighthood and Brigandage (Sub-division 5.1: Conflicts among "us"; Sub-division 5.2: Conflicts between "us" and "them": "We" challenge; Sub-division 5.3: Conflicts between "us" and "them": "They" attack; Sub-division 5.4: Forays: Attack; Sub-division 5.5: Attacked side counterattacks).

Division 6: Crime and punishment/vengeance (Sub-division 6.1: Murder; Sub-division 6.2: Perfidious invitation; Sub-division 6.3: Attack on non-combatant; Sub-division 6.Y: Inversions (meritorious deeds)).

Division 7: Enemy captures champion (Sub-division 7.1: Capture during a combat; Sub-division 7.2: Capture with the help of treachery; Sub-division 7.3: Champion commits an offence; Sub-division 7.4: Champion commits an error; Sub-division 7.X: Quasi-capture; Sub-division 7.Y: Inversions; Sub-division 7.Z: Other ways of capture).

Division 8: Delivery of captive champion (Sub-division 8.1: Captive frees himself; Sub-division 8.2: Captive is helped to free himself; Sub-division 8.3: Others free captive; Sub-division 8.Y: Inversions: Captive is not freed).

Tasks

Division 9: Task/test (Sub-division 9.1: Attack on enemy; Sub-division 9.2: Accomplishing task in enemy territory).

Division 10: Contests.

Division 11: Bets.

Matrimonial conflicts

Division 12: Winning a wife: heroic marriage (Sub-division 12.1: Conflict between bride's and groom's side; Sub-division 12.2: Conflict on the way from bride's to groom's home; Sub-division 12.3: Conflict between two rival brides; Sub-division 12.X: Inversions; Sub-division 12.Y: Parodies).

Division 13: Marriage interrupted and restored (Sub-division 13.1: Husband restores interrupted marriage; Sub-division 13.2: Wife restores interrupted marriage).

Division 14: Marriage terminated (Sub-division 14.1: Husband terminates marriage; Sub-division 14.2: Wife terminates marriage).

(3) Model for the story about the epic battle and the epic duel. The model consists of 35 "Epic Narrative Segments (ENS-units)"; most of them are of the nature of Propp's "functions" (Propp 1928/68) with a subject-role performing an action in relation to an object-role. Some are transitions in space and transmission of information ("connectives") (see Jason 1977b). And some serve as "narrative particles" which do not belong to action (performer's remarks and boundary formulae).

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